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Looking at the past for help in the present: The role of historical photos in middle and secondary history classes

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LOOKING AT THE PAST FOR HELP IN THE PRESENT: THE ROLE OF HISTORICAL PHOTOS IN MIDDLE AND SECONDARY HISTORY CLASSES

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide guidance on how teachers can introduce historical photographs to their history class. Werner (2002) argues that visual texts are no longer simple tools that enhance the look of a written text, but are central to student learning. We (one author is a veteran social studies teacher and the other author is an education professor) specifically address Werner's call for social studies educators to teach students how to be critical readers of visual texts. In the manuscript, we discuss the role of historical photographs in social studies classes and provide practical methods and activities teachers can use to introduce more images to their students. By bridging students' visually rich outside world with the world inside the classroom, we seek to enable leaners to be interpreters rather than uncritical consumers of visual texts.

When his alarm clock buzzes, eighth-grade student Johnny (a pseudonym), reluctantly reaches for it and turns it off. As he is turning off his alarm, he grabs his smartphone off the nightstand. He toggles through his phone's apps to find the one labeled Instagram. He immediately begins to scroll through pictures posted by his friends, athletes, and celebrities. He double-clicks on a few to like them, and he even comments on one.

At the breakfast table, Johnny plays on his smartphone while his two-year-old sister is sitting in her high chair playing with a smart pad. At one point during the bus ride to school, the bus stops at a red light. Johnny looks up from playing a game on his phone to see some graffiti on the side of a building. The image is a rendering of a boy with a gun and dollar signs around him. Johnny cannot make sense of the art, but he takes a picture of it with this phone. He thinks it will make a good wallpaper for his phone.

When the bus reaches the school, students are greeted with reminders to shut their phones off as they enter the building. In his classes, Johnny's interactions with visuals are common, but he doesn't delve deeper than just looking at them. In English class, he views a piece of art without a caption printed next to a poem in his textbook. In math, he spends the whole period struggling to make sense of Pythagoras's theorem and how it will impact his life outside of school. In social studies, a PowerPoint on the lives of former slaves during the Reconstruction Era contains images on every slide, but the teacher only briefly mentions them during the lecture. After school, Johnny walks to his bus, turns on his smartphone, and returns to his world of consuming visual media.

The purpose of this article is to provide guidance on how teachers can introduce historical photographs to their history class and foster in-depth learning. Werner (2002) argues that visual texts are no longer simple tools that enhance the look of a written text. Instead, visual texts "are the social world and need to be treated as subject matter in the classroom" (p. 401). Werner calls on social studies teachers to teach students how to be critical readers of visual texts, thus enabling leaners to be interpreters rather than uncritical consumers. In the following section, we discuss the role of historical photographs in social studies classes that teachers and methods professors can use to introduce more images to their students.

Today's students are connected to devices that produce instantaneous images of their friends, pop culture news, and the latest viral videos on YouTube. They use these same devices to capture images of their daily lives and upload them to social websites to garner comments and likes from friends. According to a survey by Common Sense Media (Rideout, 2013), three-fourths of all students between infancy and eight years old have access to mobile devices at home such as smartphones and tablets. Between 2011 and 2013, the number of students who have used mobile devices grew from 38% to 72%. Students are spending upwards to eight hours a day in front of screens consuming images through games, apps, and videos (Rideout, 2013). With students interacting with images so much in their social lives, teachers may find visuals valuable tools in making content relevant and engaging.

Most social studies teachers already use visual tools in their classrooms in a variety of ways (Coventry, Felten, Jaffee, O'Leary, & Weis, 2006; Madison, 2004; Waters & Russell, 2012). For many years, graphic organizers have been a popular pedagogical tool to help students visualize notes and information. Documentary films and historically based movies are popular among social studies teachers to bring learning to life. Interactive maps provide students and teachers ways to visually enhance geography. Another common practice is looking at pictures from the past for information on past styles, events, and famous historical figures. Students enjoy viewing photographs to see how people in the past lived. However, as Barton (2001) points out, the real authentic learning experience with photographs happens when students are taught how to analyze photographs.

Some researchers argue that it is time to move analyzing historical photographs to the forefront of social studies education (Barton, 2001; Coventry et al., 2006; Madison, 2004; Waters & Russell, 2012; Werner, 2002). Historical photographs, when examined and analyzed closely, provide students with glimpses into past cultures, revealing to students eras that have long since disappeared (Levine, 2004). Furthermore, through these images, students can learn valuable interpretation skills that they may transfer to their media-enriched lives outside of school.

Benefits of Historical Photos in Social Studies

Historical photographs can impact many aspects of the social studies classroom by: (a) fostering high levels of student engagement, (b) enhancing experiential learning, (c) developing historical empathy, and (d) developing visual literacy skills applicable to life outside of school. However, teachers should exercise prudence when selecting images. We also include a section concerning some of the challenges of using historical photographs.

Historical photographs can play key roles in generating variety and engaging students. In student surveys spanning several decades, students sparingly list social studies as their favorite subject. Students can be discouraged by the lack of variety in instructional methods. Often, they find passive assignments such as lectures and bookwork boring and mundane. Students report that they are interested in being actively engaged in the content. Allowing students to read and question images sparks engagement (Chiodo & Byford, 2004; Hootstein, 1995; Russell & Waters, 2010; Shaughnessy & Haladyna, 1985).

Working with historical photographs can also trigger emotional responses that can then turn into meaningful and memorable experiences for students. As some researchers point out, when students use their hearts as well as their heads to interact with the past, those feelings transfer into lasting memories (Berry, Schmied, & Schrock, 2008; Zull, 2004). Several studies have concluded that memories, experiences, and interactions with visuals evoke emotional reactions that can cause longer lasting cognitive effects than those that do not (Goolkasian, 2000; Hamann, Ely, Grafton, & Kilts, 1999; Kensinger & Corkin, 2003; Levine & Pizarro, 2004).

A close examination and analysis of photographs may also increase students' cultural awareness and empathy toward others (Woyshner, 2006). By learning to analyze images, some students develop a stronger appreciation for different cultures. This new awareness of globalization can lead students "to know, to do, and to be ethical citizens in a rapidly changing world" (Little, Felten, & Berry, 2010, p. 49). Werner (2002) believes that using visuals in a historical context can assist students in developing narratives that reveal personal biases and encourage students to seek empathetic views of others. Photos have a way of staying present in viewers' minds. Being able to recall a moving image could impact a young learner for many years.

Another benefit of incorporating photographs into the social studies curriculum is that students will be learning a skill that is transferable to their lives outside of school. Modern society calls for students to be fluent readers of a multitude of texts. Technology's advancement into nearly every occupation and aspect of life requires a skillset and knowledge base that is different from traditional text-based teaching strategies. Gee (2003) calls for a multimodal approach to teaching and learning. He states that "meaning and knowledge are built up through various modalities (images, texts, symbols, interactions, abstract design, sound, etc.), not just words" (p. 210). He argues that students understand and retain more when content is taught in a variety of ways. The notion that pictures can be used to reach more learners fits into Gardner's (1993) theory of multiple intelligences. Using visuals can provide an avenue of learning for students who learn best through visuals and aesthetically enhanced resources.

Furthermore, learning how to interpret more than just text-based resources better prepares students to engage with visuals in life outside of the classroom. Students make meaning of their social world through visual imagery (Burns, 2006; Callow, 2006). Because of the increase in image-based social media and the mobility and accessibility of electronic devices, students are immersed in visuals during much of their time away from school. Visual messages have the power to shape stereotypes, determine authoritative relationships, shape group identities, and influence personal perceptions and beliefs. Therefore, teaching students to critically analyze images can be helpful to them inside and outside of school.

Methods to Introduce Historical Photographs in the Social Studies Classroom

Incorporating historical photographs into the curriculum can be a challenging yet rewarding experience. In this section we include tools, strategies, and suggestions of ways to introduce students to analyzing and interpreting historical images. An actual lesson from an eighth-grade history class will be used to demonstrate one approach. The purpose of the lesson was for students to visualize the lives of children in and around textile mills at the turn of the 20th century. Using this lesson as an example, the following topics will be addressed: (a) locating photographs, (b) selecting photographs, (c) and conducting a lesson in analyzing images from the past.

Thanks to the digitization of many archives, teachers have quick and easy access to thousands of images. A search for visual images using Google images is a good starting point for teachers. Following links can lead to historical archives and websites rich with visuals, information, and other historical artifacts about a topic. For this lesson on children and textile mills, the Google images search yielded many photographs of children at work in textile factories. The rapid growth of textile mills and the concern over child labor were topics of public interest during the Progressive Era that led both private and public organizations to hire photographers. These individuals snapped numerous images to document the working and living conditions of these children. The works of photographer Lewis Hine were deemed most beneficial for this lesson. Hine's work is digitized at the Library of Congress (http://www.loc.gov/pictures/search/?q=lewis%20hine%20collection&sg=true). This site contains more than 150 images from Lewis Hine's collection.

When choosing a photo to use in the classroom, there are several questions to consider: (a) Do the photographs meet the objectives of the lesson? (b) Are the photographs visually appealing? (3) Are the images thought provoking to students? First, it is important to use photographs that focus on and are relevant to the topic and goals of the lesson. Injecting an image with little or no connection to the topic can confuse students and cause disengagement (Madison, 2004). For this lesson on children and the textile mills, a list of topics was created for students to visualize work, living conditions, recreation, religion, and education. Next, the list was compared to the available photographs. Finally, four photographs were selected that focus on children's work life, home life, and recreation in and around the textile mills.

A second consideration in selecting photographs is that the photographs should be visually appealing, provocative, or eye-catching. Pictures with these qualities can have lasting impressions on students' emotions thus causing students' brains to connect with the photograph and remember it for a long time (Berry, Schmied, & Schrock, 2008). Images that are in focus, sharp, and clear should be selected. Out of focus, grainy, or blurry images could hinder students' abilities to properly analyze the photograph. Also, students new to analyzing photographs need the people, objects, and activities to be clearly in focus in order to efficiently practice and develop their analyzing skills.

Third, consider selecting photographs that contain a lot of content, such as people, objects, and activities that help generate student questions and interest. As Barton (2001) points out, students like looking at, talking about, and inferring about the subjects and actions in pictures. These qualities are what make pictures useful and engaging forms of instruction. For this lesson,

Figure A: *Dillon (S.C.) Mills.*
Charley Baxley. Has doffed 4 years.
Gets 50 cents. Had been out hunting.
LC-DIG-nclc-01498.

Figure B: *Charlie and Ollie Allen*
LC-DIG-nclc-02978.

Figure C: *Housing conditions,*
Floyd Cotton Mill
LC-DIG-nclc-02772.

Figure D: *Nannie Coleson, looper*
who said she was 11 years old, and
has been working in the Crescent
Hosiery Mill for some months
LC-DIG-nclc-02949.

Photographs retrieved from the National Child Labor Committee collection,
Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

images that showed the various aspects of children's lives in textile mills and ones that would generate student questions were chosen. For example, the photograph of the boy with the rabbit (Figure A) generated the following questions: Why is he not smiling? Why is no one else around? Why are there dark lines in the grass? How old is he?

The Lesson

The example lesson shared here was implemented in an eighth-grade history class. As an opener to the lesson, students brainstormed ideas, terms, and themes they remembered from previous lessons on textile mills. Students' responses were recorded on the whiteboard to form a collective class list. Following the opener, the teacher shared with students that during this lesson they would have a chance to visualize the lives of children in and around textile mills. Before each class, the desks were arranged into group settings and students were assigned to groups of three. Being able to collaborate with classmates is helpful to students when learning to analyze historical photos. Students are able to share ideas, test hypothesis, and be shown aspects of the image they may have missed (Werner, 2002).

Next, students were provided with four copies of the same graphic organizer to use in recording their analysis of the photographs. Graphic organizers help students to keep track of their findings, stay focused on the task, and visualize relationships among the pictures. The graphic organizer (Figure E) used in this lesson consists of three sections: First Look, Second Look, and Third Look.

The First Look section consists of observational questions that require students to record what they see in the picture. The Second Look section asks students to respond to questions that challenge them to consider source and context. The Third Look section asks students to infer about the content of the photograph and ask questions of the image.

Once students had their graphic organizers, a photograph (Figure F) was projected on the screen, and the teacher modeled analyzing the image by thinking aloud while completing the graphic organizer. The teacher used the graphic organizer as a guide to ensure students understood how to use the organizer and to ease any fears or apprehensions. The teacher addressed several questions such as what was first noticed, the location of the photo, the possible purpose for taking the photograph, events prior to and after the photograph was taken, and questions raised by the photograph. Students later reported that the example was helpful in showing them what to look for and being able to describe what they saw through writing.

Figure F: *Doffers in Trenton Mills, Gastonia, N.C. Others as small and some smaller. Little girls too. LC-DIG-nclc-01383.*

FIRST LOOK

List the people, objects, and activities you see in the photograph.

People	**Objects**	**Activities**

I first noticed…

SECOND LOOK

What is the location of this photograph? (Consider geographical and physical locations.) Cite evidence.

When was this photo taken? (Consider the time, season, year, & era.) Cite evidence.

Who do you think took this photo? Why??

Who is the intended audience for this image? Cite evidence.

THIRD LOOK

What do you think happened right before this photo was taken?

What do you think happened right after this photo was taken?

What is the one thing you will remember the most from this photo?

What are some questions you have about the photograph?

Next, students analyzed the photographs in their groups. As they worked, the teacher moved from group to group to monitor their progress. During this visit to each group of students, the teacher listened to students' discussions, helped those who were struggling, and answered questions about the pictures. Students spent about 25 minutes analyzing the four photographs.

After the groups were finished, the class participated in a whole group discussion. To keep the dialog from becoming mundane, the teacher did not review every question for each photograph. Instead, volunteers shared their responses to some of the tasks and responded to other groups' observations.

The whole class discussion allowed the class to achieve several goals. One, the students were able to learn new content knowledge about child labor and textile mills. In the discussion of Figure D, for example, the class discussed the jobs of young girls in the mills, the working conditions, and the nature of the relationship she may have had with the woman next to her. The students also used the photo to briefly discuss both the clothes the workers were wearing and the large size of the socks they were sewing.

Second, the teacher was able to help students correct inaccurate assumptions and observations. For example, in the photograph labeled Figure B of the two boys standing in front of a house, some students answered that a parent took the picture to memorialize their child's first day at work. A class discussion was held on why that would be an inaccurate assumption. Students cited that collectively, these photographs show the poverty of textile families, and it was doubtful they would own a camera. Some students argued that it was not taken by a parent because most parents would require their sons to wash their faces before taking a picture. Those students who believed the picture was taken by a child labor activist cited that the boy on the left's sleeve is rolled up to display his injuries more clearly for the camera.

Third, the whole class discussion allowed for the development of what Werner (2002) calls "a communal space where new ideas are provoked, minds are changed, and interpretive horizons are expanded" (p. 422). During the discussions, students were often heard vocalizing "ah ha" moments when a student would point out a detail they had missed. For example, in Figure C, many of my suburban students did not realize that the building in the background was a factory until a fellow student pointed it out. The identification of the mill building directly behind the house led to a discussion of who lives in the house and why it is was located close to the factory.

Challenges

Teachers will face some challenges when incorporating historical images in their social studies curriculum. One is finding the time and space in a busy curriculum calendar to teach visual literacy skills in social studies. Yet, once students learn how to analyze visuals, they can apply and practice those skills during brief activities such as analyzing photographs found in the textbook, using a photograph as an opener or hook, or analyzing images in a PowerPoint lecture.

Another challenge is that working with too many images at once may be overwhelming and distracting to students. To overcome this barrier, teachers should ease students into analyzing photographs by working with a small number of visuals at a time. With practice and guidance, students will become more comfortable with the task and be able to work with multiple images.

Conclusion

Just like Johnny in the opening narrative, many students spend their time outside of school inundated with images. Students should recognize that seeing images every day is not the same as being critical viewers. History classrooms can provide students with opportunities to learn how to critically read and analyze visual images through historical photographs. Students can then take this knowledge and apply it to their current visually rich culture. As Felten (2008) notes, "living in an image-rich world…does not mean students…naturally possess sophisticated visual literacy skills" (p. 60). If students are to become visually literate members of society, teachers must work to teach them to be critical consumers of visual texts. The vast expanse of social studies curriculum provides multiple opportunities for teachers to incorporate visual literacy skills that can benefit students as citizens in a visually rich society.

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Appendix

List of Resources

The following websites contain guides to analyzing historical photographs.

- The Smithsonian National Museum of American History's Engaging Students with Primary Sources: http://historyexplorer.si.edu/PrimarySources.pdf

- The Library of Congress's Analyzing Photographs and Prints Teacher Guide: http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/resources/Analyzing_Photographs_and_Prints.pdf

- The National Archives' Photo Analysis Worksheet: http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/photo.html

- Stanford University's Beyond the Bubble: https://beyondthebubble.stanford.edu/

Resources for photographs:

- Library of Congress: http://www.loc.gov/pictures/

- American Memory: http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html

- The National Archives: http://docsteach.org/

- LIFE magazine's collection hosted by Google: http://images.google.com/hosted/life

- Flickr: http://www.flickr.com/

- Tumblr: https://www.tumblr.com